

The Self-directed Teacher

Managing the learning process

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Contents

Series editor's preface	xi
Preface	xiii
Introduction: The language teaching challenge	1
1 A context for classroom action	8
Introduction	8
Setting the context and defining terms	9
The curriculum in outline	20
Needs analysis	23
Setting goals and objectives	27
Summary and conclusions	33
Project	34
2 The planning process	43
Introduction	43
Lesson preparation	44
Pre-instructional decision making	53
Collaborating with colleagues: Planning and staff meetings	55
Summary and conclusions	57
Projects	58
3 Classroom talk	60
Introduction	60
Direct instruction	63
Error correction and feedback	68
Teacher questions	80
Instructions	96
The use of the first language	98
Summary and conclusions	100
Project	101
4 Classroom dynamics	104
Introduction	104
Pacing	105

viii *Contents*

Classroom monitoring	106
Cross-cultural aspects of classroom management	112
The “effective” teaching movement	116
Reflective teaching	120
Dealing with behavior problems	122
Summary and conclusions	128
Projects	128
5 Instructional groups	133
Introduction	133
Teacher and learner roles	134
Small group and pair work	142
Large classes	147
One-to-one instruction	149
Self-directed learning	155
Mixed-level groups	158
Summary and conclusions	167
Projects	170
6 Managing resources	179
Introduction	179
Using commercial teaching texts	180
Making the most of the teacher’s manual	186
Exploiting resources that lack a teacher’s guide	188
Electronic support	192
Using computers in the classroom	195
Visuals and realia	199
Summary and conclusions	201
Projects	201
7 Affective issues in the language classroom	208
Introduction	208
Motivation	209
Attitude	215
Anxiety	219
Summary and conclusions	220
Projects	221
8 Monitoring and evaluation	229
Introduction	229
Formal evaluation	230
Informal evaluation	232
Self-evaluation	234
Evaluation by others	238

Summary and conclusions	245
Projects	245
Appendix: Language learning in action	253
Further reading	283
References	285
Author index	293
Subject index	295

Introduction: The language teaching challenge

Why did we write this book?

This book is intended to fill what we see as a major gap in the language education literature. It covers the central issues and concerns relating to the effective management of teaching and learning processes in second and foreign language classrooms. By “management” we mean the creation of a positive pedagogical environment which facilitates learning. Our focus, therefore, is less on the instructional issues of curriculum planning and methodology, and more on the professional decisions teachers must make to ensure that learning takes place effectively. The ultimate aim of the book is to provide teachers and teachers in training with knowledge and skills that will allow them to take control of teaching processes in their classrooms – help to operationalize the notion of the self-directed teacher. This concept of self-direction on the part of both teachers and learners is one to which we unashamedly adhere.

What is the book about?

This book is basically about decision making. Its aim is to help you make informed decisions as you manage the learning process in your classrooms. According to Wong et al. (1992), effective classroom management has three dimensions:

1. *Planning and preparation* preventing problems from arising
2. *Classroom strategy* coping with problems as they arise
3. *Whole-school strategy* ensuring that the actions and intentions of teachers are in harmony

In this book we deal with all three dimensions, although the principal focus is at the level of classroom strategy. However, it is only with reference to prespecified aims and objectives, within the curricular frameworks estab-

2 *The self-directed teacher*

lished in this section, that one can predict and develop strategies for dealing with problems which may potentially arise within the classroom. Effective management, then, means taking steps to prevent problems from arising and coping with problems “on line” as they occur in the classroom.

Everard (1986: 127) identifies five key managerial qualities, which are set out in the following list along with examples which we have interpolated from language teaching contexts. The list illustrates the orientation we take here – seeing management, not in terms of budgets, the manipulation of human resources, and so on, but in terms of the managerial skills and knowledge needed for effectively planning, implementing, and evaluating language learning opportunities in both second and foreign language classrooms.

<i>Managerial quality</i>	<i>Language teaching context</i>
1. To know what he or she wants to happen and cause it to happen	Developing aims and objectives of a lesson or sequence
2. To exercise responsibility over resources and turn them to purposeful account	Making effective use of resources
3. To promote effectiveness in work and search for continual improvement	Motivating learners toward better learning strategies
4. To be accountable for the performance of the unit he or she is managing	Being accountable to parents, head, and learners
5. To set a climate or tone conducive to enabling people to give of their best	Establishing rapport with learners and maintaining good classroom organization

Biggs and Telfer (1987: 362) suggest that instructional decision making can be located on a continuum that has high-structure decisions at one extreme and low-structure decisions at the other.

Our focus is on the sorts of decisions a teacher must make to be a successful manager of instruction in the here-and-now of the classroom. These decisions fall between two extremes:

1. *high-structure decisions*, which emphasize the teacher’s role in setting up the learning environment, and which allow relatively few options and hence require a reactive role from the students;
2. *low-structure decisions*, which provide the pupil with many options and maximum autonomy when in the learning experience (which is not to say that the teacher does not have to work very hard to provide a low-structure environment).

In the pages which follow, we have attempted to deal with both high- and low-structure management decisions, and you will find a synthesis of relevant research and practice in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of language programs in relation to both of these managerial dimensions. In writing the book, we have taken care to present issues and data from a wide range of classroom contexts and situations, while avoiding the temptation to present neatly pre-packaged solutions. Rather than attempt to push a particular line, we invite you to consider the issues, challenges, and options in a reflective way and relate them to the pedagogical contexts with which you are familiar.

How is the book organized?

Because this book is concerned with effectively managing the learning process, its essential concerns are methodological in flavor and deal with issues such as teacher talk, group work, class size, and resources. A basic tenet of the book, however, is that decisions cannot be made in a vacuum. The curricular context determines what is the correct or incorrect decision in most instances. For this reason, Chapter 1 deals with curriculum issues within which methodological issues related to the management of classroom learning can be situated and contextualized. It also articulates our understanding of key terms such as learner-centeredness, learning-centeredness, self-directed teaching, and communicative language teaching. We believe that these concepts are closely related, and we hope to demonstrate these interrelationships as well as the ways in which the appearance of these new concepts in the classroom have increased the managerial demands upon the teacher.

Management decisions can be understood and dealt with in terms of the degree to which particular tasks require the balance of power to be handed from teacher to student. There are times – high-structure situations – when it is appropriate for power and control to be invested in the teacher. Low-structure tasks, however, require student initiative. The learning process is managed appropriately when both the teacher and students acknowledge and have skills to deal with the two situations. In Chapter 2, we illustrate the operation of high- and low-structure decision making through a two-dimensional framework or grid. One dimension consists of planning, implementation, and evaluation – the three essential curricular dimensions. The other dimension consists of the essential management decisions associated with high-structure and low-structure contexts. These concepts are also described in some detail in Chapter 3.

What do we believe?

Learner-centeredness, self-directed teaching, and learning from general education are now being associated with the concepts of communicative language teaching and task-based learning in applied linguistics. In Chapter 1 we present our interpretation of these terms and describe how these concepts have changed language classrooms for those teachers who have embraced them. We argue that learner-centeredness, collaborative learning, and school-based curriculum development, terms which are heard with increasing frequency these days, place greater power and control in the hands of classroom teachers who wish to incorporate them into their teaching. This additional responsibility requires teachers to be effective managers of the teaching/learning process in ways which differ from the challenges posed by systems in which the teacher is the servant of someone else's curriculum. In effect, the emergence of new concepts and ideas about language and learning "destabilizes" the classroom, and presents challenges to the established order. It is therefore impossible to divorce pedagogical issues from managerial ones, and this symbiotic relationship is captured in the following observation:

The press for "responsible self-direction" results in teachers having to help students to take responsibility for their own learning. Such teaching is usually group or individually based, requiring specialist techniques quite different from those of the traditional classroom. (Biggs & Telfer 1987: 367)

We believe that if teachers can give reasoned responses to the questions underpinning the organizational structure of this book, then learning will be successful. This, of course, is a working hypothesis to be contested in individual contexts, rather than a conclusion to be derived from one context and applied to the next. We recognize and acknowledge the challenges posed by emerging concepts of language learning and teaching, but believe that challenges provide opportunities as well as threats. In managerial terms, the greatest challenge is posed by the imperative to shift with greater frequency than hitherto from high-structure (teacher-controlled) to low-structure (student-centered) teaching/learning contexts. There are occasions in which curricular goals are best met by high-structured tasks; in other contexts, low-structured tasks are called for. In the course of the book, we try to indicate those curricular goals and contexts in which one mode is more effective than another.

What would you like to get out of the book?

In keeping with the general philosophy of the Cambridge Language Education series, this book aims to bring together research and practice in the area

of language classroom management. Through this integration, we hope that you will be able to see and appreciate how research and indeed theory can both enrich our understanding of the life of the classroom, as well as help answer the questions and address the challenges inherent in all pedagogical encounters.

Apart from the initial contextualizing chapter and the final chapter on evaluating the learning process, we have written this book so that individual chapters can be read in any order. This modular approach will enable you to explore issues in the order of importance to you, and also to skip sections that do not speak to concerns that are salient in your particular context.

What does the book contain?

You will find five different kinds of material integrated into the body of each chapter. These are input, classroom extracts, resources, tasks, and end-of-chapter projects.

Input Here, we speak directly to you, setting out the issues and challenges relating to the area in question, synthesizing relevant research, and spelling out our attitudes, beliefs, and reactions to the issues at hand.

Classroom extracts Contained in the book is a substantial number of classroom transcripts which are designed to illustrate the realization of previously discussed issues within the context of the classroom. The transcripts are supplemented with diary extracts, retrospective protocols, and stimulated recalls.

Resources There are also a wide range of practical resources relating to issues in the management of learning in the classroom. These include observation schedules, lesson plans, questionnaires, and surveys.

Tasks Within each chapter you will find a series of reflection questions and tasks. Through these the teacher and teacher in preparation can reflect on and relate the issues raised to the context of their own classroom situation.

Projects At end of each chapter are projects which are longer and more involved than the chapter tasks. They are designed to encourage you to apply some of the ideas presented in the book by observing, recording, and analyzing classroom tasks, and even entire lessons. Because some readers will not be in a position to collect such data, we have provided a lesson and an extended lesson extract as an appendix to the book.

How can the book be used?

The book can be used in a variety of ways. We recommend that you read Chapter 1 first because it provides a curricular framework for making sense

6 *The self-directed teacher*

of decision making as well as defining key terms. We also suggest that you read the chapters on affective issues and evaluation last. Apart from that, we have tried to present the material so that you can work through the book in any order that suits your own purposes and interests.

As indicated already, the book consists of various elements, including tasks, extracts, and data of various kinds. It is not necessary to do all or even any of the tasks in the book in order to benefit from what it has to offer. The rich array of texts, tasks, and data allow for greater flexibility on the part of teachers and teachers in preparation working in a range of different contexts and situations. Needless to say, it is not mandatory for all tasks and projects to be undertaken by each and every reader; in fact, there may be some contexts and situations in which it is not feasible for all projects to be done. Our aim is to provide resources for further application for those readers who might wish to do so.

You will notice as you work through the book that some tasks suggest the use of video and audiorecorded extracts of classroom interactions. We are aware that many teachers are hesitant to be videotaped or observed. However, we would like to point out that self-observation and, where possible, the observation of other teachers' classes are potentially rewarding forms of professional renewal and reflection on the various aspects of the classroom. Ideally, classroom observation should be a normal part of one's professional practice, providing opportunities for personal and professional growth while not being a threat through which teachers are criticized. Videotaping is an aid to help you reflect on how the issues raised throughout the book can be dealt with more effectively. If you manage to obtain access to a bank of recorded data, this can be used at various points throughout the book. As an additional aid to those who have difficulty obtaining classroom data, we have included lesson transcripts throughout the books as well as a transcript of an entire lesson in the appendix.

Key questions dealt with in the book

In the body of the book are questions related to all aspects of the management of learning — from teacher language to the organization of group work, from the deployment of resources to dealing with affective factors. In concluding this introduction, we would like to invite you to think about and write down the questions you would like answered in some of these key areas.

TASK

Aim To give you an opportunity to think about the questions and issues you would like dealt with in key areas relating to the management of learning.

Procedure Write down questions you would like answered in the following areas.

<i>Area</i>	<i>Questions</i>
Lesson preparation	_____
Teacher questions	_____
Lesson pacing	_____
Teaching large classes	_____
Small groups	_____
Teacher roles	_____
Learner roles	_____
Using resources	_____
Motivation	_____
Discipline	_____
Monitoring	_____